

EUGENE HARRIS

Tape 2

lightning and thunder, tape stops

Summary: Eugene Harris talks to Betsy Peterson about his career as a longshoreman. He discusses the strike of 1967-68, working with rice and asbestos, and why the ship channel is the best place in the world to work.

00:28 Started out on docks during 1950s. Loading and unloading raw hide. Swiss would pay one penny a hide. Fresh hides to be cured and then loaded to go to the docks. Would wrap the hide to go to the docks, unload for ship, stretch, salt, roll and stack them.

Blood meal, carbon black, 100 pound nails, barb wire, sulphur, 200 pound flour. crystal white (120 lb flour), seed rice, nobody wanted to 'work that'. Five men would work in a gang carrying 180lb each bags.

5:00

Allowed to join the union at 21. Union did not have seniority. Did not come back till the 60s. Better jobs were controlled by the gang foremans, families and by the men who knew were capable. "Cotton was king." Could make good money with cotton. Stayed together with gang, Total 17 people. Worked in the hole.

9:15

Started in the union in 50s. Met wife in Mexico. Moved to Houston as there was no work in Galveston. Containers took all the work. No work for manual labor. Didn't care to operate a machine.

13:00

Strike of 1967-68. Took part in it. Worked for Folgers coffee during strike. Needed money. Palletized coffee for \$5.00 a palate. Showed wife how to drive a towboat. Was a tow-boater. Needed money to feed children and send them to Catholic school. Almost 1970.

17:00

Both sons worked on the waterfront. One is a doctor now and the other is a business agent (TC Harris).

19:00

Worked on a lot of cotton in the Port of Houston. Then worked on Asbestos, 7 days a week, 10-15 hours a day. Then started getting rice and flour going to Cuba. Got asbestos in my lung. Did not wear any protective covering. Was given one paper mask in the morning. Loading a railcar to the ceiling and asbestos sticks to face when sweating.

Never asked for another mask. Would be made fun of. Used to get another mask at 1. A whistle would be blown for lunch. "Containers started coming in and gangs started going down." Work started decreasing. First pay-cation check was \$65.00. Couldn't believe got paid for doing nothing.

23:00

Mom used to run a bar and used to drink two liters of scotch every week. Mom left the bar to wife. Did not run it. Wanted a \$100,000 to rebuild it. Don't have that sort of money.

Have to try and get as many cars as you can when you are throwing sacks into a rail car. People take care of their own kind. Irish take care of themselves. There are a few Irishman. Not that many Mexicans on the waterfront then.

29:00

Worked out of the black union when couldn't get a job. When locals were integrated. Wasn't as bad as thought it would be. There was some trouble over seniority. Then went about business. Was past gold star when retired. Was number 1 and then .5 (laughs). 87 years old now. Retired after a heart attack in 2000. Was driving a 30,000 lb. machine. 76 years. Do miss friends, playing cards, truck drivers. It is hard to explain.

33:09

Geno was nickname. nobody ever knew real name. Down time. Would play cards. Hold em etc. Did place bets. Used to be "hell on a bike", used to be hell's angel. Used to have a fancy bike. State of Texas took it away because it ran so fast.

38:50

Longshoreman has really changed. They helped to educate children by donating a lot of money. shipping has improved. Have the best pension, Best healthcare, best dental plan in the world. Don't know what can be improved. Wife has protection. Don't want this industry to die. "Don't want automation to eat it all up."

43:00

See the same ships over and over again. Run a routine route. Worked at a steam ship company a long time. Fire the whole gang even if one person was not doing his job. Can't get a single man to replace. There was a lot of drinking. Mostly all the time. Used to make a 5 gallon drum of Zombies.

47:00

Played a lot of pranks. One time put an alligator in Reverend Louis' car. Right after a storm was cleaning the warehouse. Found a 4 1/2 ft alligator. Put the alligator to sleep by rubbing its belly. "The devil made me do it." Another time put a pair of women's underwear in the seat of a car because the owner gave the job to two young boys instead

of more deserving candidate. One time pulled the crankshaft out of someone's car and threw it in the bayou.

58:10

""This is the best place in the world to work."

Like to work bananas. (Sings a song about loading bananas.) Wore a leather strap with a horn to keep off spiders and snakes. Clerk would call out where each stack was to be loaded. Which truck. The checker would be at the end of the truck. He would tally the total load. The clerk would say which pile goes to which truck.

1:05:10

Liked to work with cotton because got paid by the bale. Bananas got paid by the hour. Dangerous loads. Military work Specialized in explosives. Knew how to secure tanks. There were accidents but nothing very serious.